

Eulogy for Sherri Osaka
Montalvo Arts Center
March 1, 2020
By Linda Ruthruff, friend and fellow volunteer.

There is a quote by Lily Tomlin that I am quite fond of. In considering the many foibles of our society she said:

“I always wondered why somebody doesn’t do something about that. Then I realized that *I* was somebody.”

Well, Sherri was one of those people who didn’t wait around for “somebody” else to do something. When she saw a problem that called to her, a problem that involved something she valued in the larger sense of what mattered in life – she would engage with her enormous energy and talents always hoping that she could do “just a little bit of good,” for besides her family, that was what made life worth living for Sherri.

So what kinds of problems called out to Sherri? Many of the ones that I saw her work on had to do with the unsustainable manner in which we have been living on this earth.

She went back to school to become a landscape architect. She became a Licensed Landscape Architect and a Bay-Friendly Qualified Designer. She opened her own business and started designing beautiful native plant gardens that used far less water than the ubiquitous lawns they replaced. They didn’t require chemicals to maintain. They used the latest technology in drip irrigation, greywater re-use and rainwater harvesting. They protected and restored ground water. They brought birds and butterflies and native bees back into peoples’ lives. People now had a place where they could take a breath and have a moment of peace in this frantic place we call home. She designed for individual homeowners, developments and municipalities. She designed my next-door neighbors’ front yard. My neighbor is so pleased with the result that she calls it “Our Own Little Park.” And I get to enjoy it every day. Sherri also taught classes through the water district and adult education. She taught people how they could install and maintain their own low water use, habitat-creating native plant garden. She did so much to promote this type of landscaping that she received a Water Champion Award from the Silicon Valley Water Conservation Coalition in 2018.



Agi Kehoe

Sherri Osaka at CNPS native plant sale, Hidden Villa, October 2018

Another thing that Sherri noticed was that the world was drowning in plastic and discarded still perfectly useful goods. Well, that wasn’t too large of a problem to tackle. She found places to shop where she could buy staples by bringing her own refillable glass and metal containers. She bought toilet paper made out of recycled paper wrapped in recycled paper and packed in a recyclable cardboard box. No plastic wrapping needed. She shopped at Goodwill, not for the low prices but because by finding the things she needed there they didn’t end up in the landfill

and didn't require using new raw materials. She followed her favorite plastic-free bloggers and was thrilled to share with others her systems and resources.

A few months ago she needed a cork board. A dear friend was drawing pictures for her and she wanted to display them. Knowing that I was a fellow Goodwill shopper she sent me off. Well, I guess that I spiffed up the one I found a little bit too much. When I handed it to her she eyed it suspiciously. "That's not new is it?"

Sherri was a long-term volunteer with the Santa Clara Valley Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. We have a group called Gardening with Natives. About ten years ago Arvind Kumar was running it. But he became our incoming president. Sherri took notice of the situation and later told me that she realized that Arvind wasn't going to be able to be president and keep running Gardening with Natives. So she stepped up and volunteered to take over.

What did that mean? Gardening with Natives puts on 30-40 talks a year at libraries all over Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Sherri worked with individual librarians to find agreeable dates and interesting topics. She identified and recruited engaging speakers and volunteer Hosts and Greeters. She made sure the handouts were printed, the rooms were set up and the speakers showed up with their presentations on two types of media. She either created the publicity flyers herself or coordinated with on-line volunteers and made sure they were delivered to the libraries in a timely fashion. She put together an ever-changing array of slides for the introduction before the talks, giving information about our organization and upcoming events and programs. She made the magic happen year after year.

Sherri was so good at recruiting great speakers that she got the speakers for the last three of our bi-yearly symposia. She pulled off the greatest coup for our most recent one last year. Doug Tallamy, the author of *Bringing Nature Home*, is arguably the hottest speaker in the country on the subject of what individuals can do to help preserve the diversity of life on Earth. I can tell you that no one else on that committee would have dreamed on trying to fly Doug out to speak at our little symposium. Sherri not only dreamed it, she pulled it off. And people are still talking about how inspired they were to go home and plant natives. It was a message of hope and efficacy that she brought to all of us.

When Sherri developed breast cancer for the second time back in 2011 she kept going. When it metastasized in 2013 she and I talked about whether she would close her business and step down from running Gardening with Natives. But she decided to see how she did with her treatment and so she kept going. She didn't tell people what she was going through because she didn't want people to treat her differently. She didn't want her life to become about cancer. She kept going through pills and ports and infusions; through endless CAT scans and the agonizing wait each time to see if the scan brought good news or bad. She kept going through 18 different chemicals and in the last year, cold capping to keep her hair. Cancer couldn't keep her down or change the values her life stood for.

I don't know how many of you out there have tried to write one of these things. How do you sum up a life and a friendship in "five to ten minutes"? There are no words or ideas that are enough to say. But I want you to know that Sherri was a remarkable woman who tried and succeeded in making a difference in her community. She made her life count. And she was a good friend. No matter how dire her circumstances, she always remembered what was going on

in *your* life and asked you about it with genuine interest. She retained a beautiful sense of awe and wonder about the small miracles of life that happen around us. The sound of water running into her rain garden, a new bird visitor, a plant settling in and beginning to thrive, a tree in flower and full of bees; these are the things that brought excitement and joy to her face. I will so miss sharing these moments with her.

Sherri and I always knew how this would eventually end. Only about 25% of women with metastatic breast cancer survive even five years. Sherri made it for six and one half. We talked about death often in the last months. She wasn't afraid to die. She thought it was just a transition to whatever comes next. So Sherri, I hope that you found something wonderful. Thank you for all you did to make life better here. And thank you for letting me walk this road with you.